

WASHINGTON, DC— Today, U.S. Representative Peter DeFazio (D-OR) voted in favor of H.R. 2642, the fiscal year 2008 spending bill for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and military construction projects. This legislation provides the largest increase in funding for veterans' health care in the VA's 77-year history. Importantly, unlike the President's budget, which proposed doubling the prescription drug co-payment for veterans and imposing an annual enrollment fee of up to \$750, this increased funding will not shift costs for services onto the backs of veterans.

“With this bill, the Democratic-led Congress is making an unprecedented commitment to those who serve our country in the military,” said DeFazio. “The federal government must do more than provide rhetorical support for our troops.

This bill provides the actual dollars necessary to improve the delivery of health care services, meet the increasingly complex health care needs of veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and reduce the disgraceful massive backlog of disability claims.”

H.R. 2642 includes \$43.2 billion for the VA, \$3.8 billion above the President's request and \$6.7 billion above the 2007 level. This funding will improve the delivery of health care services to veterans, add over 1,000 new claims processors to reduce the backlog of 400,000 disability claims, and fund new initiatives to better address post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mental health needs, polytraumas, and substance abuse among veterans.

This funding includes: \$28.9 billion for veterans' medical services, \$1.7 billion above the President's request and \$3.4 billion above the 2007 level;

\$600 million to establish five Level I Polytrauma Centers and three Centers of Excellence for Mental Health and PTSD to improve the delivery of health care services to veterans, particularly those with multiple injuries and mental health problems;

\$2.9 billion for specialty mental health care, equal to the President's request and \$100 million over the 2007 level;

\$4.1 billion for VA medical facilities, \$508 million above the President's request and \$530 million above the 2007 level to address ongoing maintenance and renovation needs (the Department estimates a maintenance backlog of over \$5 billion);

\$480 million for VA medical and prosthetic research, \$69 million above the President's request and \$66 million above the 2007 level;

\$429 million for the VA substance abuse program, \$70 million above the President's request and \$72 million above the 2007 amount;

\$130 million to assist homeless veterans, \$23 million above the President's request and \$38 million over the 2007 level;

"At a time when millions of Americans are rotating in and out of combat zones, often multiple times, it is even more important that Congress fulfill the government's promises to veterans. After all, how we treat our veterans today will play a large role in whether enough Americans will volunteer to protect and defend our country in the future. I am proud of the service of our men and women in the military, and I am pleased that Congress is finally stepping up with the funding levels necessary to fully honor that commitment," continued DeFazio.